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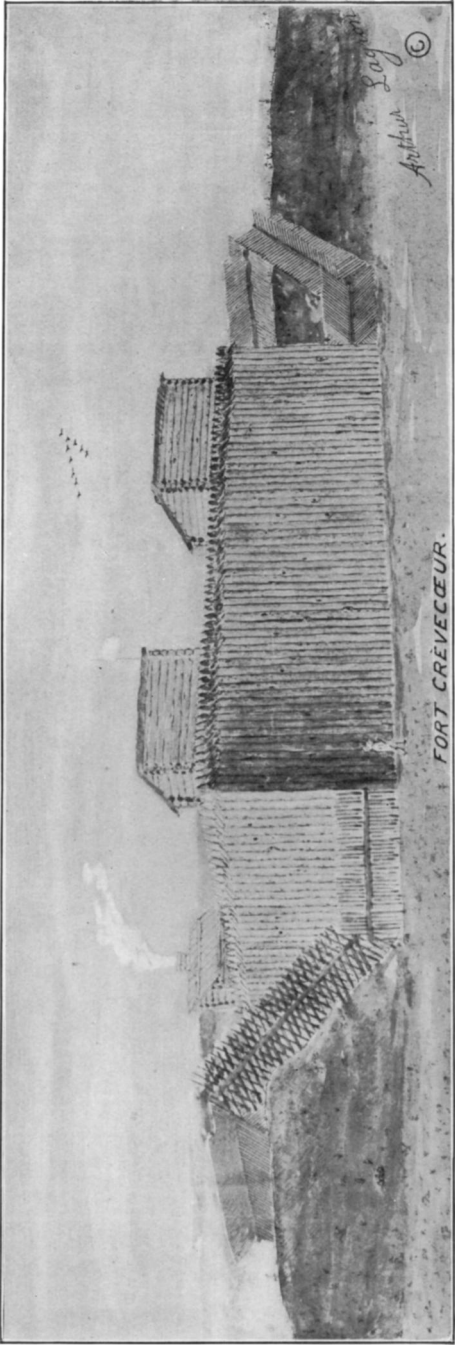
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FORT CRÈVECOEUR.

Arthur  
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## FORT CREVECOEUR.

By ARTHUR LAGRON, CIVIL ENGINEER AND EX-OFFICER OF THE FRENCH  
GENIE MILITAIRE.

It has justly been said that the building of Fort Crevecoeur was the starting point of the history of the State of Illinois. Though much time and effort have been spent on attempting to fix a probable location, the fact is that heretofore the exact or even approximate site was uncertain.

It was by chance that I also became interested in locating the fort, after reading and studying what was available on the subject, I arrived at a very different conclusion than did those who have treated this question before.

In order to get the facts we must confine our study to the French text, we must know *what*, la Salle said not *what he meant* to say as some of the translators have told us.

In the first place La Salle, in his description of the building, does not mention the name, although he afterward repeatedly refers to it as "Fort de Crèvecoeur," not Crève Cœur. De Tonty in his brief description tells us: "He (Mr. de la Salle) built a fort that he called Crèvecoeur."

If those who built that fort called it Crèvecoeur, what right have we now to change that name?

Crèvecoeur is a proper name as well as Rockwell, Whiteside or Whitehead. I know of four incorporated villages in the Northeast part of France, where de la Salle came from, by the name of Crèvecoeur. There was at that time a very prominent family of nobles, whose name was de Crèvecoeur. He may have had different reasons for thus naming his fort; the fact that we do not know his reasons does not justify us in changing its orthography to adapt it to an imaginary idea that it means "broken heart." Crève-coeur does not mean broken heart. It is true that the compound crève-coeur does exist but it means literally heart break, heart sore, therefore a heart-rending thing. Now if la Salle had had his heart broken, he would not have divulged it before his men; besides, he did not know at that time that his boat the Griffin was lost. Therefore the

naming of his fort was not influenced by this event, that fort could not be heart-rending to him—rather the reverse, it was his hope. Consequently, spelling Crève Coeur in two words is distorting history.

As to its location, the extensive researches of the Peoria Chapter of Daughters of American Revolution, as well as the results of my own investigations, prove that there is no one living now that has any knowledge of it, or has known any one who had, and that we have to depend only and entirely on the descriptions that were written during the French occupation.

Then if we have to depend solely on that, we have nothing to do with the controversy whether Hennepin was a plagiarist or not. Sieur de la Salle himself gives us a very clear and concise description, and as it is really the most authentic document we have, I will follow it, analyze it sentence by sentence, and from it rebuild the fort and find a location that will fit it. For that purpose I follow the French text, as given in Margry's second volume, and in my translation I keep, as nearly as possible, his own phraseology.

In speaking of building a fort he continues:

"They (the men) all agreed to it with good graces, and we repaired to the place that I had destined. On the 15th of January, towards evening a great thaw which opportunely occurred, rendered the river free from Pimitoui as far as there" (the place destined).

From his previous descriptions there is no doubt that he was near the Indian village somewhere in the neighborhood of what is now the North end of Adams Street in Averyville. Then, if he had to wait for the river to thaw, he had to cross it, and the fact that he says from Pimitoui "as far as there" conveys the idea that it was a certain distance down, because if it had been right across or above from Pimitoui, it would have been unnecessary to add "as far as there."

Although he does not state here how far, later on, when leaving, he says he rowed nearly one hour when he struck a place where, owing to an enlargement of the river the current was not swift enough to free the river of ice, this gives us an idea of the distance.

Speaking of the place selected he says:

"It was a little 'tertre' about 540 feet from the river bank, up to the foot of which the river spread itself every time that it rained much."

The French word "tertre" has no real equivalent in English. It is neither hillock nor mound; it is a small, somewhat flat elevation of earth, la Salle says it was a small one.

When he says "at the foot of which the river spread itself," it means that the foot of the tertre was in the bottom where the river spread

Fig. 1 — PLAN  
from la Salle's description



Bottom land

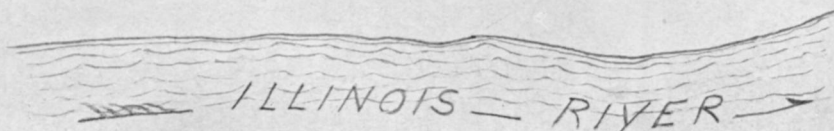


Fig 2 - Section Through AB  
from la Salle's description



itself and was still the river. If it had been at the place now selected, the river proper could never have reached it.

The French language is very precise, and La Salle especially so.

Continuing the description he goes on:

"Two wide and deep ravines inclosed two other sides of the tertre and half of the fourth, which I caused to be completely inclosed by a ditch that joined the two ravines."

The front part of that "tertre" must have been abrupt enough to be considered as inclosed. This will help us in locating it.

The ravines were wide and deep but hardly deeper than the foot of the tertre and wide in proportion. (See Fig. 1.)

"All along the other edge of the ravines I caused to be placed good *chevaux de frise*."

This indicates that the place was not timbered, as *chevaux de frise* are really only a substitute for abatis, which consist in felling trees in such a manner as to impede the approaches of an entrenchment.

"had the slopes cut down all around, and with the dirt so excavated I caused to be built, on the top, a parapet capable of covering a man."

This will give us an idea of the height of the tertre; as he says "with the dirt" and not from the dirt, it follows that he used all, and as the parapet could not have a section of more than 50 square feet, if the tertre was 15 feet high and cut straight down, as he says it was, there would certainly have been 50 square feet of excavation. (See Fig. 2.)

"The whole covered (or rather, lined) from the foot of the tertre to the top of the parapet with long *madriers*."

*Madrier* is a term in fortification that can be translated by "piece of timber." Those *madriers* were long, but could not be longer than the timber he could readily get in the vicinity, perhaps 25 feet.

"The lower end of which was in groove between two long pieces of wood that extended all around the eminence." (See Fig. 2.)

This shows that the ditch had been cut practically as deep as the ravines, that is to say, as deep as the tertre was high, and also that the front part facing the river had been cut down and lined with *madriers* like the rest.

"and the top of these *madriers* fastened by long longitudinal timbers themselves fastened by mortises and tenons with other pieces of timber that projected through the parapet. (See Fig. 2.) In front of that work I caused to be planted, all over, pointed posts 25 feet in height, one foot in diameter, buried three feet in the ground, doweled to the longitudinal pieces that fastened the *madriers*."

These posts being 25 feet long, planted three feet in the ground would leave 22 feet for the total height.

"with a fraise at the top  $2\frac{1}{2}$  feet long to prevent a surprise. I did not change the shape of this 'plateau' which, though not regular, was however sufficiently well flanked against savages."

That word "plateau" indicates that the top was flat. The rest of his description refers to the building of lodgings, two for his men in two corners most important for the defensive, one in a third corner for the forge, while in the fourth was that of the Recollet Brothers. We may note though that he says: "The forge was built along the curtain facing the woods." This shows two things: first, that the place itself was not timbered, but there were woods in sight, not far off on one side; second, that he does not mention any hills or bluffs, but simply woods. This shows that the bluffs were not the predominant thing in sight. This will also help us to find a location.

Fig. 4 shows the fort complete exactly as described by Sieur de la Salle.

Fig. 4 is the illustration at the beginning of this article.

Now let us recapitulate what we know directly and absolutely from his own words:

*First*—It was on the East side of the river, nearly one hour's ride, in skiff, below the lake.

*Second*—The foot of his tertre was in the bottom and rather a low bottom, since the water reached it every time it rained much.

*Third*—It was an abrupt rise, flat on the top, or nearly so, and it was not timbered.

*Fourth*—There was no conspicuous steep bluff or hill in the near vicinity.

*Fifth*—That tertre was between two ravines.

*Sixth*—It was about 540 feet from the river bank.

Hennepin's description, though somewhat ambiguous, does not conflict with any of those known facts; neither does it add to them.

*Seventh*—Yet it would be well to consider a seventh one, not emanating from La Salle, but from one who visited de Tonty later. He says that Fort Crèvecoeur was one mile below a point where two creeks emptied into the river opposite each other. This is the most direct information we have concerning this question.

Before proceeding to look for the place that will fulfill these seven known conditions, I found it convenient to make a geological examination of the neighborhood.

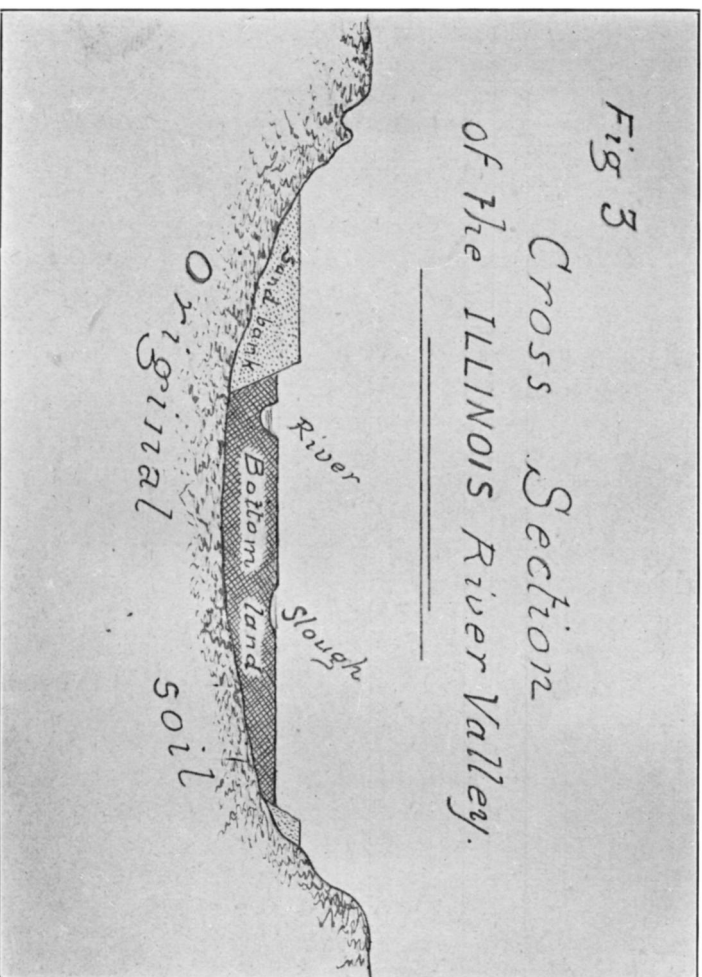
I find that we have to deal with four different kinds of formations: (See Fig. 3.)

1. The original soil as it emerged from the depth of the ocean ages ago, being represented by the level country back of the bluffs on both sides of the river valley proper. This original soil has been excavated by



Fig 3  
Cross Section  
of the ILLINOIS River Valley.

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a mighty stream of water running from bluff to bluff; these bluffs being nothing more than the shores of this once great body of water that flowed between them. They were rounded up later by the action of the elements and probably during the glacial period. All those slopes belonging to this original soil are heavily timbered.

2. Later the volume of water decreased, and in receding being unable to occupy the whole primitive channel, left here and there sand banks. All of that part of Peoria from the bluff to Washington Street is on a sand bank that was once under water. These sand banks were not timbered.

3. The channel of the Illinois River once has been much deeper. That was before the great Mississippi had built its vast delta, and as the delta advanced in the gulf, the Mississippi water had to rise in order to be able to flow down. Naturally the tributaries like the Illinois had to rise also. This slow and gradual rise, that has taken place for fifty or one hundred thousand years, more or less, is still in process; each high water or overflow deposits a little layer of mud. Thus was formed, and is forming yet, the black level mold we call "bottom land," and there is no possibility, no cause whatever, for this bottom to form sudden and abrupt rises above its natural level as that where the fort was built.

4. The river which makes this bottom, owns it, claims and takes the privilege to cut it, either by slow process of abrasion or by sudden bursts caused by accidental obstructions in its way. This has been done quite often, and would be done yet had not the farmer taken into his head the notion to build levees to stop those encroachments.

When the river changes its channel, it leaves a slough that is below the level of the bottom proper, and remains so for a number of years, there being no material to fill it other than the thin deposit of mud brought there by the periodical overflow of the river or its tributary streams.

Mr. de la Salle takes us to a sudden rise in the soil, the foot of which is in the third formation—the bottom; it was flat on the top, it was not timbered, therefore it belonged to the second formation; it was a sand bank.

To find the place that would answer all those requisites, I have thoroughly examined the grounds which I find well represented in a general way by the Government Illinois River Survey, 1902-1904. As any one can have access to that, I will now refer to it.

The real bottom is about elevation 447 to 450; that was probably lower 230 years ago. However, it is safe to take elevation 465 as the top of the tertre; this has practically remained the same.

Beginning North, there is no sand bank, no flat spots whatever, that can be taken in consideration until we reach Section 6, Groveland Township, where we find a sand bank stretching over a quarter of a mile northwest of the hills, that fills the first condition. It also answers the requirements of condition two.

I owe to the kindness of Mr. Walter E. Emery, Chief Engineer of the P. & P. U. Ry., the access to their old maps, together with his personal information, that I am able to say that the sand bank above mentioned answers also to the requirements of condition three, except that we do not know if it was timbered or not, but we do know that it was a pure sand bank; timber does not grow in pure sand.

At that place the hills are about 1,500 feet distant and not steep, consequently not conspicuous. So much for condition four.

I noticed in my inspections that there is a ravine coming down the hills at the brick yard, near the center line of the above named section 6, and another 400 feet West. I was able, with the assistance of drawings in the Engineer's office of the P. & P. U., to follow the course of these ravines in their way toward the river to the right of way of the L. E. & W. Ry., where they are only about 100 feet apart.

When the L. E. & W. built their track right on the edge of that sand bank, they built one culvert for both, and unquestionably committed the vandalism of going over Fort Crèvecoeur. Decidedly Fort Crèvecoeur was born unlucky.

There is no other place where two ravines come so near together through a sand bank, that fulfills condition five.

As for condition six, we find on the Government maps that there is a decided and uninterrupted depression in the bottom, starting on the East side of the river opposite Edmund Street in Peoria, and running southerly, crosses the P. & P. U. railway at the interlocking tower. This depression, in spite of the overflows of Farm Creek, and the obstruction put in the way of its outlet by the P. & P. U. embankment, is still some ten feet below the general bottom land level, showing conclusively that 230 years ago the river ran there. I visited the spot and was able to plainly see the old bank from which the fort would have been about 540 feet.

That certainly satisfies condition six, as it is the only place where it can be satisfied.

Finally, for condition seven, I find that the two creeks mentioned, namely, Kickapoo and Farm Creeks, do not empty opposite each other now, but place the river where it was then, and examine the Government map, and you will see that they then emptied opposite each other, or nearly so, and about one mile above the point I describe.

This is so positively clear that not a shadow of doubt ought to remain as to this location.

But if the L. E. & W. had not disfigured the surface, what would we or could we see?

According to Mr. de la Salle, his men demolished the fort. They surely did not carry the timbers away. In their wild madness they threw them down. There was enough debris to nearly fill the ravines, then the parapets and the slopes that had been cut vertical, fell in. Being thus engaged with heavy timber and earth, the ravine may or may not have been able to carry off the flow of water after heavy rains. Perhaps they united through the artificial ditch; perhaps they found less resistance in cutting a new ravine. All that, we do not know, but we know enough to assume with certainty that one hundred years after, there was no vestige left of Fort Crèvecoeur, except perhaps a slight depression in the uniformity of the sand bank, which no one unacquainted with the true description would ever have suspected to be the site of a Fort. My conclusion therefore is, that Fort Crèvecoeur was erected on a low sandy hillock on the Tazewell side of the Illinois River on what is now the right of way of the Lake Erie and Western Railway and about 600 feet up stream or easterly from where the L. E. & W. Ry. joins the P. & P. U. Ry. to cross over the P. & P. U. Ry. bridge into Peoria, the two roads meeting there from opposite directions.